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THE TEACHER OF ENGLISH

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If free and full criticism is a fortunate thing, then the state of the teacher of English is most enviable. We have been flagellating ourselves and each other—especially each other—with excited zeal. Our colleagues in other subjects, seeing good sport a-going, have caught the excitement and lent a joyful hand. Even the business man, who used to be distrustful of his judgment in things scholastic, has picked up the cat-o'-nine-tails and laid it on with a will. It has been a great hue and cry, this chase of the English teacher. But some of us are getting about enough. We are beginning to feel that our sins are partially expiated, and we are going to hit back.

We don't get good enough results, we tell each other and get told by outsiders. Granted. But who does in this imperfect world? Do you, teachers of mathematics and the sciences? Do you, teachers of modern or ancient languages? Do you, teachers in vocational schools? Do you, business men, when you have clerks to train? Do you, any of you, even train *yourselves* in your work as well as you ought? Do you not, all of you, just do tolerably well with such miscellaneous human material as comes to you, with such gifts as Providence has seen fit to bestow on you, and leave perfection to that other world in which most of you profess to believe? "The poor ye have always with you"—the poor in purse, the poor in intellect, the poor in spirit. It is a great utterance, both historic and prophetic. No, we are not teaching English well

enough. We know it. And we are trying to set our house in order. Have you, our friends, any houses of your own to set in order? When you want help, call on us. We shall be glad to reciprocate.

There are several things the matter with us teachers of English. In the first place, there aren't enough of us for the job. That has been recently proved. When more teachers are employed there will be at least a better opportunity for us to do good work.

The general level of our ability is not high enough. The belief is still found that anyone can teach English, if he can talk it and read it; aspirants in the field often cherish this delusion. Ask them the motive in their choice and they may answer, "I intend to teach English because I just love it." A good answer so far as it goes; one ought to "love" what one teaches. But do they love it well enough to study it, to bring to bear on it the processes of the analytic intellect, as successful teachers do in other subjects, even in such purely aesthetic things as music and art? If not, let them continue to love English (by which they usually mean fiction and poetry only), but not presume to teach it.

Sometimes they will admit frankly that it is the only subject they know well enough to teach; which means usually that they know a little English and less of anything else. They have come to English by a process of elimination. Such claims of fitness to teach are not very convincing.

Catalogues of qualities and attainments required in any profession are, we know, conjectural and precarious. There is always the unpredictable result due to the proportions in which traits are mixed, and the unexpected results of the clash of will and temperament with circumstances. And yet I shall venture upon a statement of what the teacher of English needs to have.

First, let us say, a clear mind. Clearness of mind is conceded to be necessary in the "exact" subjects; but it is even more necessary in the "inexact." In mathematics, a confused mind may check up its processes in an equation; in physics it may test its processes in the laboratory. Tests of clear thinking in the field of literature are far more difficult.

Quickness of mind is vital, as vital as quickness of operation to the surgeon. While the surgeon fumbles and delays, the patient

dies. While the teacher of English fumbles, "the good moment goes." The thought and the feeling are transient, volatile. They must be caught at the moment, evoked into life as expression, or driven home by illustration, or reinforced by parallel. And they must be operated on by immediate resource, or left alone by instant decision.

Retentiveness and fulness of memory are imperative. A barren mind is not the storage battery to electrify other minds. Nor can any teacher of English foresee what he may need to know when he faces his pupils, if he gets their minds to working. The apt illustration, the pointed question, the significant application, these are the ripe fruit of a well-stored mind. Modesty and self-repression I place high in the list. Most of us teachers talk too much. Some of us like to read aloud; and good reading is a valuable, almost an indispensable, help in some kinds of interpretations. But let us not fall into the snare of feeling that our reading is as the tongues of angels, or that our comments embody the accumulated wisdom of the ages. That way ruin lies. Let us modestly hold ourselves in leash. It is the children, not we, who are now entitled to the opportunity of getting training in English.

We need the social temperament: the fondness for people, the interest in their minds and their views, the quick perception of the hidden significance of their slight reactions, the readiness and the skill to "play the game" with them according to the rules they can follow. Do this, and we can in time bring them to play by our rules.

Finally, we need a keen, intuitive sense of language. The poetry of Shakspeare and Milton, the prose of the Bible, of Swift, of Newman, the nursery jingles, the slang of the street—I had almost said the picturesque profanity of the truck-driver or the stevedore—all kinds of dialect, the new words of trade, all these types of utterance belong to our English speech. And a cosmopolitan sympathy with them all is a wholesome antidote against that stiff and inanimate thing that is derisively called "schoolmaster's English."

This is a formidable array of expectations from a humble teacher of English. For these traits, and a professional equip-

ment on top of them, we pay, perhaps, a thousand a year. The same gifts—with zealous self-interest substituted for modesty—would be worth in business five or even ten times that sum. And yet there are business men, on boards of education, who wonder why they cannot get teachers who can bring their sons and daughters to love literature and to use good English. It even happens that the same men have not themselves ever loved literature or cared to use good English; and the laws of heredity are at work quite as steadily as the law of gravitation. In sum, we freely admit that our results in English are largely unsatisfactory. But I protest, in confidence rather than in humility of spirit, (1) that to expect all children to be brought to love the best literature and to use good English is a utopian dream—are we teachers of English to be the only workers in the world to whom is allowed no margin of failure? (2) that the task is at present impossibly large, even for such results as are achievable; (3) that our ranks will be filled with stronger people just as soon as the general public realizes that in this as in other kinds of service the best is costly.

I do not think we teachers of English are given to complaining. On the contrary, we are too patient, and too suggestible. We too readily assume the responsibility not only for our delinquencies, but for the delinquencies of the school authorities and even for the delinquencies of nature. We are idealists, or we should not be in this profession.

It is obvious that securing good teachers of English is primarily a problem of selection. College courses of study, college degrees, university courses in research cannot make teachers out of those who are temperamentally unfitted. Neither academic scholarship nor training in schools of education is of much value in changing the fundamental traits or endowments. The first task, therefore, of those upon whom falls the responsibility of training teachers of English is to find and encourage the promising and to weed out the unfit.

But, given the proper natural endowments, what shall constitute a suitable equipment for the teacher of English? The answer might be made briefly: A knowledge and love of the subject; the ability to stimulate and guide other minds in acquiring knowledge

and love of the subject; and skill in the provocative talk that leads to clear, vigorous thought and expression, oral and written.

How does the problem present itself to those of us who are interested in the training of teachers of English? What, under conditions not yet ideal, may we set up as a working standard?

1. A general college education, with the emphasis upon the word general. Foreign languages, science, history, economics, the world of affairs, any of these his field may happen to touch. The elective system, if overused, may spoil a good teacher, not by giving him too much in his own subject but by giving him too little in others. The teacher of English needs to know something of many things, and to have the habit of varied and even miscellaneous reading.

2. A special training in English, both in literature and in language. This means, of course, a full knowledge of the great things in our literature, a fair knowledge of much of the second rate, and, above all, a scholar's sense of relative values. A teacher who thinks Wordsworth only childish and Fielding only vulgar is not yet ready for his work. Independence in the fields of conflicting criticism and a sense of what is of peculiar value to oneself are marks of the developed mind; but catholicity of taste helps one to judge also of the value that a book may have for minds other than his own. The teacher of English must know his language not only as an instrument, but also as a growth, as an organic thing with a long history behind it. Minute and full philological knowledge is not necessary: too much of it may even spoil a teacher's perspective; but ignorance in this field is a bad handicap. It is almost certain to go with a narrow purism, with a mistaken certitude about things that are "right" or "wrong" in language.

3. A professional training. This has come to mean two things:

a) General courses in the theory and practice of teaching, based on psychology and the general principles of education. One may undoubtedly become an expert teacher in any field without such instruction; countless teachers have done so. But one escapes many blunders, arrives at skill sooner, for such knowledge. A teacher so instructed chooses his plans and materials more wisely, because he knows what he is doing and why. He is better fitted to meet the problems of the school, better able to judge of the value or

usefulness of proposed material or methods; and he will be more likely to regard his calling as having the dignity of a profession.

b) His second need is a course in the teaching of English, the study of his subject from the point of view which he must assume when he comes to teach it. This is conveniently subdivided into the study of the teaching of literature, and the study of the teaching of composition. In the teaching of literature we are to assume, as I have already said, a good general knowledge of real literature, sound taste, and openness of mind.

But knowing literature in this way is not enough. One must come to know what it may mean, or may be made to mean, to the boy and girl; what things in a given poem or story or drama may have interest and significance to an immature mind. He must know, in other words, the points of contact between the literature and adolescent minds. If the main interest of the selection, as he sees it, is beyond the reach of boys and girls, he had better pass the selection by. Some girls will get the quaint humor and the gentle pathos of *Cranford*; most boys will not. The self-questioning of George Eliot's heroines is too analytic and too excessively moral for boys and girls. George Eliot—except for *Silas Marner*—belongs to the college age. The conceits of the Elizabethan and Cavalier lyrics presuppose a background of general reading and special interests which, for most people, postpones them indefinitely.

A teacher of literature must know what things are worth careful study, and what are not entitled to minute or repeated reading. Most pupils will find some reward in reading *Macbeth* or *Julius Caesar* carefully. But why require, as the school syllabus of a great city once did, six weeks of study on Dickens' *Christmas Carol*? We are all grateful to Dickens—but is he to be read in that way?

How to meet verbal difficulties, words and allusions, how to fill in the social background, present or historical, that gives significance to a passage in a book, how to fit in a bit here and a bit there of the author's life where it has some real pertinence, how to widen the range and stimulate the degree of the pupil's interests by suggestive references to other books and to things outside of books—how, in brief, to stimulate alert and intelligent talk about literature—these are some of the things in which professional training should help the

young teacher. For, we know well enough, there are ways of teaching that will quite definitely *kill* interest, and warning can be given against these; and there are ways of teaching that will stimulate, and these can be suggested. I will risk a definite illustration. Set a boy to studying the structure of *Treasure Island*, its crises, its minor climaxes, and its style, and you can spoil even this excellent story. Take it as a pirate story, provoked by the challenge of the author's twelve-year-old stepson, "Why don't you write something interesting?" tell the pupils how the author's father entered into the fun of the thing and insisted on drawing the map and making the list of articles in Billy Bones's sea-chest, and you've made a good start. Then have the pupils read the story as a story, have them tell what scenes they liked best, and why, and, perhaps, why the scenes worked out as they did; ask them such questions as what use Stevenson made of Flint's parrot, why he brought in Ben Gunn, how Jim Hawkins blundered into doing the lucky thing so often, why John Silver was allowed to escape hanging, and where the Island was, anyhow—and you will be likely to get two things: a lively appreciation of the story, and an attitude toward it not unlike the author's own. The gist of the matter for the teacher of literature is this: Get for yourself and give to your pupils the author's own point of view toward his work. If you can't do this, or if you can't take this, choose a book that can be so treated. The *Merchant of Venice* taught as a lesson in Christian charity is absurd. The Shylock story of the play is, rather, a lively bear-baiting in which the Christians serve for dogs and Shylock for bear. That the bear gets the worst of it certainly does not prove that the bear is contemptible or the dogs merciful. There are other interests in the play, of course, but not moral ones. Shakspeare's real interests were dramatic. Emerson deplored the fact that Shakspeare had no moral enthusiasms; that he used his great talents merely for the entertainment of his audience; and Carlyle made the same despondent wail. But are there not other good things in life besides moral lessons? Must we always be reminded of our duties? We are thankful for Chaucer and Shakspeare and Burns and Scott, morality or no morality.

It will be seen already that I view the preparation for the

teaching of literature as an equipment in resources, and as an attitude of mind. Given these, with the personal qualities outlined at the beginning, and a teacher cannot fail. He will not make every student love the classics; of course not. I am tired of hearing that standard set up. And, quite frankly, no man who is both intelligent and honest expects or pretends to expect any such result. But he may hope to have some students like the classics, others to respect them at a distance, and the rest respectfully to hold their peace.

I come now to the preparation for teaching composition.

The teacher need not be a gifted writer himself; but he must have good habits of expression, oral and written. He must know the elements of theory and practice well enough to criticize in a liberal way. If he faints at a split infinitive or weeps at the locution, "It is me," he hasn't yet been sufficiently liberalized by fulness of knowledge.

He needs a fine sense for language: not for stilted, bookish English, but for the real, live, changing and growing language. I like the teacher who works with me to see the good even in slang, to see when it is picturesque and when it is stupid, and to know when it is to be used and when avoided. I like him to like dialect, to be sensitive to its quaintness and alive to its occasional piquancy. I like him to flinch under what is ugly or sloppy in accent or form, and to lift his head in satisfaction when he meets something new and telling. I like him, in brief, to be alert to admire what is intrinsically attractive and effective in language, and quick to condemn what is stupid and ugly. He should be a discriminating critic of our everyday English. If he has these qualities, he will be able, as a teacher of English should, to get close to the minds of his pupils and train and guide them. For note, the business of the teacher of English is, peculiarly, to stir his pupils to think.

And this brings me to another important qualification. All teachers need to know many things outside their own field, but the teacher of English has special need of a wide range of interests. If his pupils are to learn to use their language, they will do it only through talking interestedly about real things, real ideas, real issues. Mere language is nothing; ideas in language are much. And, to a

high-school boy, or to any man of affairs, the only test of language is the effectiveness with which it does its work of conveying ideas to someone else who wants to hear them, or who is made willing to hear them, by the way they are put. In brief, the test of expression is that it *makes good* by establishing the desired connection between speaker and hearer or between writer and reader. Now it is the *material* that has the intrinsic interest, not the form; the form derives its importance only from the way in which it conveys the material (I am speaking not of poetry but of common, everyday English), and the teacher of English must know many ways of helping pupils to an interest in the things around them. This is his way of stimulating the desire to speak and to write, and of educating his pupils through their speaking and writing.

Shall he correct themes? Surely. But he must know how. He must not be fussy, nor pitch his standard too high. He must not forget that it is the ideas, rather than the form, that are the main thing. He must not forget to put the responsibility for the form on the pupils, as fast as possible, and to make them proof-read their own themes. He must himself be highly enough trained not only to catch at a rapid glance the errors and infelicities of expression that are, however important, still only matters of detail; he must be highly enough trained also to make in rapid reading valid judgments of the general qualities of thought in a pupil's work, to gauge it for soundness, clearness, proportion, interest. He must see it, indeed, as a critic sees a manuscript submitted for publication.

I cannot close without reverting to the topic with which I began. All these qualities and acquirements are imperatively needed for teaching English. And for these the dear intelligent public, which criticizes our achievements with such a jaunty confidence, is willing to pay almost as much as it pays a bricklayer, and the good bricklayer is seldom overpaid. What is the proper reaction: tears or Homeric laughter?